

Chapter Four

"High Over Halfway Between Your World and Mine": Audre Lorde

Like the poetry of Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde's is a poetics of location, of constructed lesbian heritage. And like her friend Pat Parker before her, Audre Lorde took a firmly rooted, multiply located stand based on an identity forged through multiple differences—expressing an identity poetics. In this sense, Audre Lorde both draws on the poetics of lesbian feminism and prefigures the politics of postmodernism. Lorde is a pivotal character connecting lesbian feminism and queer theory; in her multiple self-positioning as "Black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother,"¹ she stands historically and rhetorically at the crux of the so-called generation gap between lesbian-feminist and queer theoretical notions of identity.

Much was made by critics in the 1990s of Lorde's "postmodern" stance on identity. In Lorde's autobiographical novel *Zami*, Kathryn Provost sees "a speaker fully aware of linguistic contradictions and slippage, of difference/*différance* [*sic*], and of how these characteristics come into play in the making of meaning and subjectivity" ("Becoming," 48). Similarly, in "*Zami* and the Politics of Plural Identity," Erin Carlston offers an astute reading of the novel as a proto-theory of "positionality." Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson describe Lorde's and other black feminists' antiracist declamations in theoretical terms, as exposing "the earlier quasi-metanarratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations" ("Social Criticism," 33).² Christine di Stefano points out that Lorde's multiple "differences" make gender essentialism an impossible stance, thus challenging feminism with a postmodern sensibility ("Dilemmas," 65). Thomas Foster places Lorde's poem "School Note" in the textual company of such postmodern luminaries as Jacques Derrida, Antonio Gramsci, Sandra Harding, Julia Kristeva, and François Lyotard. Sagri Dhairyam looks at Lorde's work from a decidedly poststructuralist, postcolonialist perspective in " 'Artifacts for Survival': Remapping

the Contours of Poetry with Audre Lorde," and Gloria T. Hull suggests "viewing Lorde's poetry in the light of Kristeva's theory" to illuminate both the poetry and the poststructuralist theory ("Living," 172).

And in fact, Lorde's insistence on her "multiple selves"³—her many public declarations and poetic expressions—speak to a postmodern sensibility. She eschews the temptation "of easy blackness as salvation" in her poem "Between Ourselves" (*Between*, 14–17; *Black*, 112–14). She positions herself as perpetually shifting location, simultaneously occupying seemingly contradictory spaces in "School Note" (*Between*, 4–5; *Black*, 55):

for the embattled
there is no place
that cannot be
home
nor is (ll. 21–25)

Over and over she insisted on the string of identifiers that proclaimed her "Sister Outsider," a figure Donna Haraway would term emblematic of a postmodern, cyborgian sense of self.

But Audre Lorde was a lesbian feminist; she said so again and again. She said so in her 1979 interview with Adrienne Rich, calling herself "a Black lesbian feminist with cancer" (*Sister*, 108). She says so in her 1980 essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," where she refers to herself again as "a Black lesbian feminist" (*Sister*, 120). And she says so in the title of "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" (*Sister*, 72–80). In her "Open Letter to Mary Daly," she warns that white lesbian feminists exclude black women at their peril (*Sister*, 69). She offered a diffuse definition of lesbianism to interviewer Karla Hammond in 1981, citing Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" and echoing Lillian Faderman's and Adrienne Rich's famously lesbian-feminist definitions (Hammond, "An Interview," 20, 21). Lorde is frequently included in literary critics' discussions of lesbian-feminist poetry, often in the company of Judy Grahn, almost always with Adrienne Rich. Several of the tributes to Parker connect the two.⁴

Does Lorde's avowed and recognized lesbian feminism mean that her work does not share an affinity with queer theory? Definitely not. Does that affinity negate her lesbian feminism? Not at all. These are questions possible only from an either/or perspective. I hesitate before terming Lorde "both/and," however. She so incisively criticized the limits of hegemonic categories, so forcefully exposed the racism of white women's studies and

activism, that I am tempted to call her "both/and/neither." Lorde never termed herself "queer" in the postmodern sense, and though she called herself "lesbian-feminist," she never stopped there. The long version of her self-naming included a great deal more, including a reading of those who would truncate her list:

As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong. . . .

I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. ("Age, Race," 114, 120)

Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am a woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours? ("Transformation," 41–42)

Queer critics who turn to Audre Lorde's work use her multiple positioning, the moral/political force invoked by the particular locations she inhabits, and her widespread influence on lesbian and feminist politics and theory to shore up their constructivist position and to oppose what they see as lesbian feminism's naive essentialism. Lorde is, in Marilyn Farwell's terms, "one of the few lesbian-feminists appropriated by postmodernists" (Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots*, 94). Lorde herself made clear that she abhorred the appropriation of her experience and voice in her 1981 speech "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." She reads from a letter sent to her by a white feminist, "'Because you are Black and Lesbian, you seem to speak with the moral authority of suffering.' Yes, I am Black and Lesbian," Lorde responds, "and what you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority. There is a difference" ("Anger," 132).

The queer move of laying claim to Lorde is used against lesbian feminism, at least to the extent that Lorde's lesbian feminism is downplayed. Her proclamation of her "multiple selves" is rooted in the original meaning of "identity politics" formulated by the Black feminist Combahee River Collective. The group's manifesto explains that its politics stemmed from the fact that "no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression"

(275). The lack of an essentialist notion of identity is conspicuous. The distinction between perceived identity as a pretext for oppression and one's sense of self is clearly articulated by their statement that "as Black women"—the identity/pretext—"we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic" (277). Like the women of the Combahee River Collective, Lorde understood the importance of defining one's own identity in this hostile context. "If we don't name ourselves, we are nothing," she told an interviewer in 1980. "As a Black woman I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. . . . So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all. In that sense it becomes a survival situation" (Hammond, "An Interview," 19). For many individuals and groups whose socially constructed subjectivities are radically situated by material oppression, identity is not taken lightly, even if it is understood as contingent.

Identity, one's name, is a sign, but not merely, casually one; it is a sign with vital power, according to Lorde, without which "there is no contact with personal power; without that contact of power there is no movement; and without movement, there's surely death" (Hammond, "An Interview," 19). This rendering of "identity politics," a term and stance that has become anathema to queer theory, shares a great deal with the use of "strategic essentialism" endorsed by Spivak, Fuss, and others. A decade or more before it was queerly theorized, it was understood and employed by Audre Lorde and her "sister outsiders."⁵

But queer theory does not acknowledge that, at least in part, the validation of multivocal, shifting identity was *learned* from Audre Lorde and others like her, who found their voices and forged their "postmodern" identity politics in the crucibles of lesbian feminism, the civil rights movement, and other identity-based movements for social justice. There is a historical genealogy between Lorde's work and postmodern queer understandings of socially constructed identities, not merely a coincidental similarity. Without question, Lorde's work irrevocably changed and indelibly marks contemporary theory, yet her work is not cited as foundational within queer theory, which is indebted to it. As Barbara Christian explains, Lorde "enlarged the race-feminist theory of that period [the 1980s], so much so that the concept of difference as a creative force is today as 'natural' a part of our analyses of the world as the notion that oppressions exist" ("Remembering," 5). White feminist/queer academics did not discern on their own the importance of differences among women (or as Teresa de Lauretis put it famously, "within women"); they began to accept the idea, and then to translate it into the pro-

fessional discourse of theory, thereby co-opting it, only after an enormous amount of pressure from working-class/lesbian/women of color.⁶

The multiplicity of identity that Lorde describes was meant to trouble the easy, too broad identification of "sisterhood"—but it is sometimes problematically essentialist itself, even in its refusal to overgeneralize "woman" or "lesbian," or to assign indelible somatic significance to "black." Lorde tends, for example, to rely upon a standpoint epistemology encapsulated in her frequent introductory phrase, "As a Black lesbian feminist, I . . ." ("Uses," 59; "Age," 120). This may be shorthand for the constructivism Lorde evinces elsewhere, but in key essays and speeches it is not clearly stated as such. Harriet Malinowitz succinctly encapsulates postmodernists' attraction to Lorde, Lorde's contribution to postmodernist feminism—and also the way in which "Lorde's entire conceptualization of speech, silence, and truth . . . are at complete odds with postmodern conceptions of the same" ("Lesbian Studies," 256–67). Despite the apparent contradictions, Lorde's credibility "as a Black lesbian feminist" nevertheless is grabbed up by postmodernism. Farwell sees this as an example of the fluid boundaries between lesbian feminism and queer theory, and of the variation within both theoretical camps:

While lesbian-feminists point the lesbian subject in a utopian direction, they imply and at times articulate a more problematic lesbian subject, one whose definition is not enclosed or finalized but in process, a figure whose sameness with other women does not preclude differences . . .

If lesbian-feminists like Rich and Lorde have deconstructive moments, then postmodernist theorists of the lesbian subject have essentialist moments. In the first place, postmodernists, like lesbian-feminists, represent a broad spectrum of thinking. While all postmodernists are united in their opposition to stable identity categories, the degree to which they refuse efforts of categorization differentiates them. (Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots*, 95)

"All the Parts of Who I Am": Self-Naming in Lorde's Essays

Lorde first invoked her litany of identity in late 1977, the year she was diagnosed with breast cancer. At that time, according to her son, Jonathan Rollins, "her life took on a kind of immediacy that most people's lives never develop. The setting of priorities and the carrying out of the highest prioritized tasks assumed a much greater importance. And there's . . . a real change

in the tone of her writing."⁷ Lorde describes her epiphany in "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action," delivered in December 1977 at the "Lesbian and Literature Panel" at the Modern Language Association Convention: "In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences" (41).⁸ She explains that she had feared that speaking her mind might have caused "pain, or death," but, faced with death, she understood it as "the final silence" and realized that she must begin to speak out as if any day could be her last. "I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me," she said, and then she uttered a single sentence that became a sort of motto, and, like lines from Grahn's "Common Woman" poems, has been reprinted on cards, buttons, and the like: "Your silence will not protect you" ("Transformation," 41).⁹

"The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" marks Lorde's first self-naming in a major speech or essay as "Black lesbian poet." As early as 1962 she insisted on naming herself equally "Black, Woman, and Poet," but "lesbian" would not enter the litany until she faced breast cancer. It remained there until the disease killed her in 1992. Although she published openly lesbian poems as early as 1972 ("Martha") and 1974 (the better-known, and sexually explicit, "Love Poem"), and spoke openly of her relationship with Frances Clayton, as late as fall 1977 Lorde's public string of identifiers did not include the word *lesbian*.¹⁰ "Transformation" also marks the introduction of the word *warrior* to Lorde's publicly spoken self-naming, at about the same time that warrior imagery became a prominent motif in her poetry: "Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge—within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior" (41).

In fact, several of the themes of "Transformation"—silence and speech, death and survival, anger and struggle—are evident in *The Black Unicorn*, the poetry collection published in the period following Lorde's diagnosis and her simultaneous "transformation." In addition, Lorde delivered three other influential speeches in this period: "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (August 1978), "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (September 1979), and "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (April 1980).¹¹ It is in these texts, taken as a group, that Lorde's new strategy of self-identification becomes clear. *The Black Unicorn* was her first book of poems to be so centrally informed by her lesbianism. In

"Uses of the Erotic," "The Master's Tools," and "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" Lorde names herself "Black lesbian feminist," as she first did in "Transformation." Lorde employed various permutations of the string of identifiers, "Black lesbian feminist woman warrior mother poet" in interviews and speeches from 1978 until her death.

In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," Lorde describes the importance of insisting upon all the parts that make up her complex identity stance:

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living. ("Age," 120–21)

Lorde's essays make clear that "the parts of who I am" and the "power from particular sources" include multiple modes of being, understanding and expressing oneself: the erotic, the poetic, the emotional, and the intellectual. Part of her rejection of "the master's tools" is the rejection of the hierarchies of prose over poetry, theory over action, intellect over emotion. "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" she asks ("Master's Tools," 110–11). In "The Master's Tools" she writes about the need to recognize and make positive use of the differences among women. But she also intends to validate a panoply of visions, genres, and methods of inquiry—when she writes that "divide and conquer must become define and empower" ("Master's Tools," 112), when she accuses heterosexual white academic feminists of "the grossest reformism" ("Master's Tools," 111), and when she utters her most resounding statement:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. ("Master's Tools," 112)

Lorde's attention to form is evident elsewhere as well. In "Transformation" she focuses on language: "For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it" (43). In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" she exposes the

explicit link that often ties genre to class: "Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper" (116). In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" she takes aim at the notion that theory, in the form of nonfiction prose, is somehow more important than other forms of expression. (And, for that matter, at the notion that theory can only take the form of nonfiction prose.) Nancy Bereano, in her introduction to Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, asserts that "Audre Lorde's voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory," contradicting Lorde's statement, reported by Bereano, "that she doesn't write theory. 'I am a poet,' she said" ("Introduction," 7). Clearly, Lorde wrote both, poetry and theory; in her own lexicon, there can be no true separation of the two. For, as Lorde writes in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (published just before her cancer diagnosis), poetry is theory inchoate:

That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding. . . . [Poetry] forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (36, 37)

In the many instances in which "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" is reprinted, quoted, or alluded to, it is rarely noted that the essay was originally a response to a specific devaluation of the importance of poetry in a political context. Lorde wrote it in 1977 as a letter to *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, after the editors announced that they had decided to stop printing poetry in order to save money. Lorde argues that poetry is not inconsequential to political struggle; poetry is meta-theory, the first articulation of idea as feeling and image.

A Lesbian-Feminist Poetics of Deconstruction: The Black Unicorn

If poetry comes first for Lorde, that makes it primary, not a stepping-stone on some teleological path toward "theory." Over and over, she named herself *poet* and emphasized her contribution to the movement, to women's "survival," as forged through poetry: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am.

The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom" ("Poetry," 38).¹² Lorde refuses to "see feel/think as a dichotomy," asserting that poetry is not effete and certainly not second to theory, "the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking" ("An Interview," 100–1).

Critics of all stripes exhibit a strange resistance to Lorde as poet, however, preferring to discuss (and presumably to read) her prose work. Sagri Dhairyam notes that only one critic has ever placed Lorde's poetry in a traditional literary context, but the critical aversion to Lorde's poems goes further.¹³ The lion's share of published criticism and references to Lorde's work centers on her essays and novel. References to her prose work outnumber references to her poetry by more than two to one in the *MLA Bibliography*, which does not even consider the multitude of other brief citations of her prose, although she published ten books of poems compared to only three collections of essays and one novel. Dhairyam attributes this to Lorde's "slippery status between activist and writer of literary merit" and notes that in bookstores "Lorde's work is not usually found in poetry sections, but is probably available in Black studies or women's studies sections." She sees this as testimony to poetry's standing as "the most 'literary' of genres" and thus the most resistant to institutional recognition of outsiders—black, female, lesbian, etc. (Dhairyam, "Artifacts," 240, 243).

For that ready audience of politicized lesbian poetry readers primed by Parker, Grahn, and others, Lorde poses a different problem. In a glowing review of *The Black Unicorn* published in *Conditions: five, The Black Women's Issue*, Fahamisha Shariat explains that Lorde's poetic diction, unlike Parker's, can be difficult to decode:

Although Audre Lorde may not be totally clear on a first, or even a second reading—sometimes her language approaches the surreal—her poems are rich enough to send us back for new discoveries with each reading. There are over sixty poems here. I think every blakwoman [*sic*] can find some that speak to her. ("Review," 176)

Add to this her unflinching antipatriarchal, antiracist message, and one can explain other critics' dismissals:

In her seventh book, Audre Lorde attempts a symbolic picture of black womanhood; an effort which fails completely. . . . The book fails because

the vision is backed by a lackluster imagination, and an inability to transform external detail into emotional experience. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

Most of the poems are simply bad. (Siconolfi)

The rhetoric is familiar, and since Lord [*sic*] is by and large unconcerned with the mechanics of poetry, her voice is undistinguished. . . . It has an enormous appeal for those who share the author's views and would like to see their own feelings and experiences confirmed in print. (*Publisher's Weekly*)

That one of these unflattering reviews was written by a priest is almost humorous, given Lorde's accounts in *Zami* and in several interviews of her travails as a girl in Catholic schools. That the reviewer who clearly does not "share the author's views" cannot manage to spell her name correctly is also telling. Does one need to share Lorde's (or any other poet's) views to appreciate her art? Or are some reviewers more implicated in her political critique than others? This raises the question, then, for whom is Lorde's poetry difficult, in what ways and for what reasons? Lorde's essays and speeches tend to simpler, declarative sentences that are at once easier to comprehend, excerpt, purloin, and—taken out of context—misconstrue. More easily recognizable as "theory," they are perforce less nuanced than the poems.¹⁴

Lorde's investment in the role of poetry, similar to Grahn's, makes *The Black Unicorn* an excellent place to look for abundant examples of her identity poetics. Some come in rather direct form, as when she writes of herself in the plural: "I look in my own faces" ("Between Ourselves," l. 75, *Black*, 112–14) or "I am blessed within my selves" ("Outside," l. 55, *Black*, 61–62). Thematically and structurally, the poems in *The Black Unicorn* present a poetics of deconstruction that resists the either/or mandate of patriarchal, white Western culture. The poems, parallel to Lorde's multiple positioning, are often made up of layer upon layer of undone, transcended, and incorporated dualisms. In the end Lorde does not seek to leave identity behind, but to put it in its place—or rather places, plural.

Her unicorn is black, after all—alluding to the African *Chi-Wara* pictured on the cover of the book and echoing the unicorn of Black Arts poet and publisher Dudley Randall's "Black Poet, White Critic"—but this is no simple reversal of images, no "easy Blackness as salvation" ("Between Ourselves," l. 36, *Black*, 112–14).¹⁵ The unicorn's blackness, with whose "fury" the speaker of the title poem identifies, is ornery (*Black*, 3). It has attitude, and it has history. Marked in the last lines by the most salient fact, that it "is not / free"

(ll. 15–16), the black unicorn is also described, in a progression of adjectives at the end of lines at the beginning and end of the short poem, as "greedy," "impatient," "restless," and "unrelenting" (ll. 1, 2, 13, 14). In other words, blackness is the marker of identity in large part because of oppression—a social construction of identity politics (an identity poetics) straight out of the Combahee River Collective statement. Lines 1 and 2 end-stop with periods: "The black unicorn is greedy. / The black unicorn is impatient." (ll. 1–2). The parallel construction of line 3 makes it seem about to do the same—"The black unicorn was mistaken"—but in classic Lordean style the sentence runs over into the next line and on, for seven lines total, acknowledging and then quickly undermining a racist expectation.¹⁶ The black unicorn was not wrong, but wronged.

The black unicorn was mistaken
for a shadow
or symbol
and taken
through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury. (ll. 3–9)

Sharon Holland perceptively argues that the wrong perpetrated was slavery, with this middle passage of the poem (ll. 3–9, of sixteen lines total) referring to the literal Middle Passage.¹⁷ Equally, the poem expresses the passage from repressed black girlhood to politicized black womanhood that Lorde so eloquently describes in *Zami*. The theme reverberates through *The Black Unicorn*, in poems like "From the House of Yemanjá" (the Yoruba orisha [deity] who is the mother of all the others, *Black*, 6). The first stanza reads,

My mother had two faces and a frying pot
where she cooked up her daughters
into girls
before she fixed our dinner.
My mother had two faces
and a broken pot
where she hid out a perfect daughter
who was not me
I am the sun and moon and forever hungry
for her eyes. (ll. 1–10)

The relentless hunger of line 9, repeated in the last stanza, relates to the "greedy" and "unrelenting" unicorn of the title poem. Though raised to behave "genteelly" and "with respect" ("Never Take Fire from a Woman," ll. 3, 8, *Black*, III), Lorde's narrative voice throughout the volume speaks as a less than "perfect daughter" ("From the House of Yemanjá," l. 7). She is the paradoxical black unicorn, straining against every form of containment—hence the use of first person ("my fury," l. 9) in the middle of "The Black Unicorn."

The traditional Western association of the white unicorn with youth and virginity alone suggests the reading of "The Black Unicorn" as a coming-of-age metaphor, but Lorde again undermines the expected dichotomies. Maturity is not achieved through phallic violation but rests in a mystical female image.¹⁸ The autonomous possession of sexual power "deep in her moonpit / growing" (ll. 11–12) suggests woman identification, that is, lesbianism. Reviewing *The Black Unicorn* for *Gay Community News* in 1979, Loraine Bethel pointed out that in the title poem's confluence of racial and sexual images Lorde also "puts the white lesbian/feminists on notice" that their rehabilitation of the mythological (white) unicorn rests in "European colonialists' distortion of African folklore" (1). Fourteen years later, Brenda Carr phrased a similar sentiment for an academic audience in a journal article subtitled "Politics of Voice, Tactical Essentialism, and Cultural Intervention in Audre Lorde's Activist Poetics and Practice":

Provisionalising a universal subject position may be seen as one of the projects of the entire volume, as the title poem "Black Unicorn" indicates. . . . Such a representational shift asks us to question our assumption that Western culture is universal by foregrounding the connection between cultural formations and positioning in such identity factors as race and gender. (142)

The poem takes on ubiquitous dichotomies—good/bad, slave/free, black/white, male/female, gay/straight—but offers an unfamiliar, unsettled resolution. The last line consists of the single word that describes the black unicorn's desired, but not actual, state: "free." The last stanza is a run-on sentence whose lines at first seem to parallel the opening stanza. But without the end-stopping punctuation of the first stanza, the tension of the last four lines of the poem bespeak the urgency of the personal and political struggle that shape the entire book:

The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free. (ll. 13–16)

The poem ends by explaining what the speaker/dominant symbol "is not" and implies what she is as a result: besieged, tenacious, in struggle.

Battle Position(ality): Lorde's Warrior Imagery

Like *lesbian*, the word *warrior* began to appear on equal semantic and grammatical footing with *Black*, *feminist*, *woman*, and other markers of Lorde's identity in various permutations of her oft-quoted litany in the late 1970s. *Warrior* thus appears to be, equally with those other terms, a marker of identity and ground for identity politics. Lorde not only intends to name herself but to call forth like and like-minded others to do battle with the oppressive status quo. Obviously, warrior is not a traditionally recognized category of identity or oppression. The term functions as a stance, a battle position(ality). Its prominence in Lorde's identity poetics litany makes it clear that the other more conventional identity markers function as stances as well. Lorde draws on both, identity and positionality, in her postmodern identity politics. Gloria (Akasha) T. Hull describes Lorde's strategic self-naming in *Our Dead Behind Us*, a volume of poems published in 1986:

Lorde's seemingly essentialist definitions of herself as black/lesbian/mother/woman are not simple, fixed terms. Rather, they represent her ceaseless negotiations of a positionality from which she can speak. Almost as soon as she achieves a place of connection, she becomes uneasy at the comfortableness . . . and proceeds to rub athwart the smooth grain to find the roughness and the slant she needs to maintain her difference-defined, complexly constructed self. ("Living," 155–56)

In *The Black Unicorn's* warrior poems, Lorde draws on historical and legendary African woman warriors (a move toward culture and identity), but selectively, to suit her creative and political vision (a social constructionist move akin to Grahn and Anzaldúa).¹⁹ Thus in the poem "125th Street and Abomey" (*Black*, 12) Lorde forges links to her "warrior sisters / who rode in

defense" of the "queendom" of Seboulista, mother of all the Yoruba orisha (ll. 18–19), and she echoes the phrase with a line in "For Assata" (*Black*, 28), her poem about 1970s black radical dissident Assata Shakur: "Assata my sister warrior / Joan of Arc and Yaa Asantewa / embrace / at the back of your cell" (ll. 28–31). Lorde explains in her "Glossary of African Names Used in the Poems" that Seboulista is known as "The Mother of us all" in Abomey ("capital and heart of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey" in present-day Benin [*Black*, 119]); Yaa Asantewa was an "Ashanti Queen Mother . . . who led her people in several successful wars against the British" (*Black*, 121). Both figures are mothers, but not in any stereotypical Western sense: Seboulista, a local manifestation of the West African Yoruba deity Mawulisa, embodies both male and female principles; Yaa Asantewa led her people against an imperialist army.

"125th Street and Abomey" belongs to part 1 of *The Black Unicorn*, a cycle of nine poems that begins with "The Black Unicorn" and makes central use of West African imagery. (In the other three parts of the book, West African imagery appears but is not the dominant trope.) As a geographical location, "125th Street and Abomey" is the crossroads of Harlem and Dahomey, which was known for its fierce warrior women (Bascom, *Yoruba*, 12; Herskovits, *Dahomey* 2:86).²⁰ Lorde positions herself both as inheriting the Dahomean amazons' legacy and as embattled in racist North America. The parallel image of "warrior sisters"/"sister warrior" in "125th Street and Abomey" and "For Assata" (in part 2) illustrates Lorde's vision of the intersection of the ancient strength of the Dahomean amazons and the contemporary strength of the oppressed African American woman activist, both figured as warriors. This is not an uncritical search for her history but a self-conscious use of it to create a political stance and a striking literary metaphor.

At the end of "125th Street and Abomey," Lorde compares herself to "Seboulista mother goddess with one breast / eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss" (ll. 32–33). She asks for Seboulista's recognition as "your severed daughter / laughing our name into echo / all the world shall remember" (ll. 35–37). Severed from Seboulista by "Half earth and time" (l. 23), Lorde is connected to her as well because they are both "severed," one-breasted women. To Seboulista, Lorde surrenders what is "most precious and least needed / my well-guarded past / the energy-eating secrets" (ll. 8–10). Through Seboulista, then, Lorde expresses the sentiment familiar from "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action": "Your silence will not protect you" (*Sister*, 41). She trades her fear and silence for "woman strength / of tongue" (ll. 21–22), the ability she boasts of at the end of the poem, of "laughing our

name into echo / all the world shall remember" (ll. 36–37). This insistence on her existence through poetry is Lorde's weapon of choice, since, as she writes in both "Transformation" (42) and the poem "A Litany for Survival" (*Black*, 31–32), "We were never meant to survive." "But women have survived. As poets," she reminds readers of "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (39).

In "For Assata," Lorde turns her warrior's weapon, her voice, to the case of Assata Shakur, imprisoned in 1973 for shooting a police officer on what many feminists and black activists considered trumped up charges.²¹ The poem describes Shakur, incarcerated and unsmiling like all the mute "sisters" in prison with her (l. 4); her "face is in shadow / obscured by the half-dark / by the thick bars" (ll. 6–8). Lorde compares Shakur to herself and to famous women warriors fighting for freedom and self-determination: Joan of Arc in fifteenth-century France and Yaa Asantewa in nineteenth century Ashanti (present-day Ghana), both fighting against British imperialism.²²

In "125th Street and Abomey" Lorde offers to Seboulisa "as libation" an "offering / of old victories / over men over women over my selves" (ll. 12–14); in "For Assata" Lorde dreams of new victories:

I dream of your freedom
as my victory
and the victory of all dark women
who forego the vanities of silence
who war and weep
sometimes against our selves
in each other
rather than our enemies
falsehoods (ll. 19–27)

Having drawn a contemporary political struggle in realistic terms (the imprisonment and silencing of black women) in the first stanza, in the second stanza Lorde sounds themes and images established in part 1 through poems like "125th Street and Abomey" as tropes for *The Black Unicorn*: community, silence, warriors in battle, multiple identity. Lorde identifies with Assata, "I dream of your freedom / as my victory" (ll. 19–20), and she identifies them both with "all dark women" (l. 21) who refuse to be silenced and who choose political struggle. Here, as elsewhere, Lorde presents no easy conception of whom she struggles against: herself, the multiplicity of her selves, her more obvious enemies (racism, sexism, etc.), and "falsehoods" (l. 27). Lines 26–27 allow for two readings of "our enemies / falsehoods." One

implies the possessive, so that it is the lies of the enemy that she struggles against. The second implies a colon after "enemies," so that "falsehoods" themselves are "our enemies," regardless of their source.

On another level, "For Assata" is a poem about internalized oppression as a block to sisterhood, community, and revolution, similar to Pat Parker's vision in "Have You Ever Tried to Hide?" Lorde would explore this theme further in her 1983 essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger": "The language by which we have been taught to dismiss ourselves and our feelings as suspect is the same language we use to dismiss and suspect each other. . . . The road to anger is paved with our unexpressed fear of each other's judgment" (*Sister*, 169). In "For Assata," Lorde succinctly expresses the destruction of internalized racism, of women "who war and weep / sometimes against our selves / in each other / rather than our enemies" (ll. 23–26).

"For Assata" meets "125th Street and Abomey" where their common images and concerns cross: both connect present-day activists with a powerful West African female legacy; both figure antiracist activism as a warrior's stance; both make reference to Lorde's sense of her multiple "selves" and the importance of overcoming the ravages of silence. Both, in short, play on a dual sense of identity and positionality, enacting Lorde's postmodern lesbian-feminist identity poetics. The two poems meet just as Joan of Arc and Yaa Asantewa and Assata Shakur meet, just as Harlem and Dahomey meet, just as the speaker and Seboulisa meet, just as Lorde meets them all.

"Eshu's Daughter": *Translating Among Tongues*

Lorde stands at the crossroads of communities, histories, geographical locations—of her multiple selves and various elements of a world marked by difference—positioning herself in *The Black Unicorn* as akin to the Yoruba deity who is worshipped at the crossroads. Eshu (also called Elegba, Legba, and Elegbara) the linguist and trickster, is mentioned by name in only three of the poems, "Dahomey," "Timepiece," and "Between Ourselves," but his image and significance resonate throughout the book and Lorde's prose work of the time period. Eshu is the "mischievous messenger between all the other *Orisha-Vodu* and humans," according to Lorde's glossary, "an accomplished linguist who both transmits and interprets" (*Black*, 119). Lorde's friend and comrade Parker plays the trickster, too, as Cheryl Clarke notes, through her "indeterminacy, her performance of multiple roles, and her interpretive power" (*Movement* 1999: 15).²³ The trickster figure's importance to Lorde is

evidenced, at least in part, by the fact that her explanation of Eshu is by far the longest of any in her glossary; clearly, Lorde wants her readers to understand his role. Lorde's position, as visionary poet straddling various intersecting identities and communities, mirrors her definition of Eshu; like the trickster-god, she overcomes dichotomies, embodies multiple differences, and moves among diverse communities and identities.

Lorde androgynizes Eshu, who is unmistakably male in the traditional tales, known for his sexual aggressiveness and almost always depicted with an erect penis (Herskovitz, *Dahomey* 2:201–30). Lorde feminizes the trickster in order to play his role, explaining that "in many Dahomean religious rituals, his part is danced by a woman with an attached phallus," a sort of Yoruba cross-dresser (*Black*, 120). In *Another Mother Tongue*, Judy Grahn cites Lorde as telling her that Eshu "originally . . . was a female, Afrikete, in the old thunder god religion that preceded Yoruba." In Grahn's version of Lorde's interpretation, Eshu "is *always* danced by a woman who straps on a straw phallus and chases the other women" (Grahn, *Another* 124–25; emphasis added). Lorde constructs the culture and history by which she is constructed, bending it to her own purposes, in recognition of its limits and of the role of the teller in the tale. She makes clear in the glossary of *The Black Unicorn* that Eshu is male, if his role is often performed by a female, but she consciously searches out and chooses to explore the implications of the female version of the trickster. Herskovitz reports one legend in which Legba takes the name "Aflakete," tonally quite close to Afrekete/Afrikete, meaning, "I have tricked you" (*Dahomey* 2:229). Lorde "tricks" the tradition by claiming what Grahn terms, generically, the "Gay" aspect of Eshu. In *Zami*, Afrekete is the sexual and spiritual partner whose presence transforms and invigorates the protagonist, helping her reconnect the pieces of herself split apart after a major breakup, but, more important, showing her how to celebrate herself, as a black lesbian, passionately.²⁴

Afrekete does not appear by name in *The Black Unicorn*, but Eshu does, and Lorde's identification with him is clear. Her poetic voice assumes his legendary powers, and in one poem she figures her multifaceted self as his inheritor: "I look in my own faces / as Eshu's daughter" ("Between Ourselves," ll. 75–76, *Black*, 112–14). In Eshu's first appearance in the volume, in the poem "Dahomey" (*Black*, 10–11), "four women joined together dying cloth / mock [Eshu's] iron quiver / standing erect and flamingly familiar" (ll. 10–12). While he is powerful, and prominently male, he is not feared by women, nor does he dominate them. Similarly, in the following stanza Lorde balances the male Shango, orisha of "lightning and thunder, war, and poli-

tics" (*Black*, 121), by invoking a strong female presence: "Thunder is a woman with braided hair / spelling the fas of Shango" (ll. 19–20). Without the female diviner, the *fa*, or destiny, prescribed by Shango cannot be known; as Lorde explains in the glossary, at least in one area, "In Nigeria, the head of the Shango cult is frequently a woman, called the Alagba" (*Black*, 121). While Shango is powerful, "one of Yemanjá's best-known and strongest sons," his fame and might derive from "mother / Seboulisa" (ll. 3–4), who is a manifestation of Yemanjá, "mother of the other *Orisha*" (*Black*, 121). Eshu appears in the second stanza, Shango in the third, but "mother / Seboulisa" is "found" by the speaker in Abomey in the first stanza, placing her at the head of the poem's structure, just as she exists at the top of the Yoruba pantheon.

"Dahomey" illustrates in microcosm how, throughout the volume, Lorde frames her personal history and contemporary struggle in the larger context of an ancient past with a continuing vibrant culture. A poet and novelist who often writes of her struggle to understand her parents (especially her mother) and her relationship to them, Lorde begins "Dahomey" describing their presence as central to her search for understanding when she visits Abomey: "It was in Abomey that I felt / the full blood of my fathers' wars / and where I found my mother / Seboulisa" (ll. 1–4).²⁵ Aurally, line 2 reads "father's wars," suggesting the daily battles against racism that her dark-skinned father fought.²⁶ In Abomey, the speaker states that she also "found my mother" (l. 3). As is common in Lorde's poems, the stanza is one long sentence, with meanings spilling over the ends of lines and suggesting multiple interpretations. Her "fathers' wars" in print suggests many fathers, that is, ancestors; her "mother" is "found" on the next line to be the orisha Seboulisa (ll. 3–4). The connection between the speaker, her biological parents, her figurative parents (i.e., ancestors), and the Yoruba orishas is set up in the first four lines of the poem. Stanzas 2 and 3 concentrate on aspects of Yoruba life and culture, introducing the interplay between individuals and the orishas Eshu and Shango, as interpreted by Lorde.

Lorde's identification with Eshu's power as a lover and a translator come together in the "tongue" imagery she employs in more than a dozen poems in *The Black Unicorn*, including the fourth and final stanza of "Dahomey":

Bearing two drums on my head I speak
 whatever language is needed
 to sharpen the knives of my tongue
 the snake is aware although sleeping
 under my blood

since I am a woman whether or not
you are against me
I will braid my hair
even
in the seasons of rain. (ll. 27–36)

In this stanza Lorde presents herself as a mix of warrior, lover, and translator among her selves and her communities. The "two drums" (l. 27) are means of communication, capable of rumbling like thunder. The connection to Shango, and thus to war and politics, is made through the repetition in lines 32–34 of the image of a woman with braided hair, from the third stanza.

At the same time, Lorde connects the allusion to Shango to her identification with Eshu as lover, when she writes, "I am a woman whether or not / you are against me" (ll. 32–33)—implying not merely an adversarial definition of "against" but a bodily one as well. The image of lovers' bodies moving "against" one another is a trademark erotic trope in Lorde's work. In "Uses of the Erotic" she explains that the erotic includes "moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love" (58). The second stanza of the erotic poem "Meet" begins, "Coming to rest / in the open mirrors of your demanded body / I will be black light as you lie against me" (ll. 17–19, *Black*, 33). In "Recreation" she writes, "you create me against your thighs" (l. 12, *Black*, 81). Again, in "Fog Report" (*Black*, 70), the image works to encompass the lovers' simultaneous difference and togetherness, a deconstruction of the typical binaries of self and other, lover and loved—binaries gendered, raced, and otherwise:

When I speak
the smell of love on my breath
distracts you
and it is easier for me
to move
against myself in you
than to solve my own equations. (ll. 4–10)

These paradoxical erotic bodies lying "against" one another echo in "Dahomey," where the warrior/politician Shango melds with the lover/poet Eshu in the voice of Lorde's first-person narrator, a traveler to her people's historic and legendary past who discovers there her contemporary role—a synthesis of all of these, expressed through poetry.

In the poem "The Women of Dan Dance with Swords in Their Hands to Mark the Time When They Were Warriors" (*Black*, 14–15), Lorde similarly presents herself as a powerful and sensuous woman who rejects the self-destructive choice of silence and the negative stereotypes of Western patriarchy. "I come as a woman / dark and open," she writes in the first stanza (ll. 7–8), not as an archetypal demon—"I did not fall from the sky" (l. 1) like Lucifer (Isaiah 12:14)—nor as a vengeful, Biblical punishment (Exodus 10:4–19), "descend[ing] like a plague of locusts" (l. 3). The poem's title alludes to the ritual dance of the amazons of Dahomey, as described by a nineteenth-century anthropologist: "In their dances—and it is the duty of the soldier and the amazon to be a proficient dancer—with eyes dilated, the right hand is working in a sawlike manner for some time, as if in the act of cutting round the neck, when both hands are used, and a twist is supposed to finish the bloody deed" (Herskovitz, *Dahomey* 2:85). Lorde identifies in the poem with the amazon's open ritual display of strength, rejecting the stereotypical role of women as silent and, like the Biblical Eve, manipulative.

I do not come like a secret warrior
with an unsheathed sword in my mouth
hidden behind my tongue
slicing my throat to ribbons
of service with a smile (ll. 14–18)

For Lorde, "Silence will not protect you"; it will kill you. She refuses to bite her tongue, to swallow the words that are her weapon. And because of her refusal, she has the use of her tongue for pleasure as well as battle. After rejecting self-denial in stanza 2, Lorde embraces erotic passion in the third and final stanza:

I come like a woman
who I am
spreading out through nights
laughter and promise
and dark heat (ll. 23–27)

In this, the third use of the word "come" in the poem, its sexual meaning is most evident. (The verb appears and takes on a sexual connotation in most of *The Black Unicorn's* erotic poems: "Meet," "Journeystones VI," "Touring," "Scar," "Timepiece," "Recreation," "Woman," "Letter for Jan.") As she

comes, she becomes "who I am," at the same time appropriating the name of the Hebrew God (Exodus 3:14); but she rejects the Western God's vengeance, allying herself instead with Yoruba deities, Eshu in particular.

Lorde's tongue is her translator's tool, giving her the ability to speak truth to her multiple communities, her warrior/orator's weapon, as she "sharpen[s] the knives of [her] tongue" ("Dahomey," l. 29), and her lover's instrument, for "licking" and "tasting" ("Meet," ll. 15, 5). For Lorde, the erotic includes but is not limited to the sexual, a stance most forcefully articulated in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (*Sister*, 53–59). Against the backdrop of the feminist antipornography movement, Lorde opposed the erotic to the pornographic, which she describes in the essay as "a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (54). Lorde links the erotic to poetry, describing both as vital expressions of emotion, knowledge, and strength. While poetry serves "as a revelatory distillation of experience" ("Poetry," 37), "The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" ("Erotic," 56). She describes "the erotic as a considered source of power and information within [women's] lives" (53), a font so forceful that it threatens patriarchy, "So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex" (55). Lorde resists the separation, asserting that the erotic provides "the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (56).

In "Uses of the Erotic" Lorde sets forth ideas that she had and would continue to illustrate in her poems: "Yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love" (58). In "Recreation," for example, Lorde explores the creativity of the erotic, describing lovemaking not just for fun (the "Recreation" of the title), but also as a form of renewal (a continually available source of mutual re-creation):

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit
whether we write or not
but as your body moves

under my hands
 charged and waiting
 we cut the leash
 you create me against your thighs
 hilly with images
 moving through our word countries
 my body
 writes into your flesh
 the poem you make of me. (ll. 1–18, *Black*, 81)

In the essay "Uses of the Erotic" and in her poetic uses of the erotic, Lorde once again seems, as it were, queerly lesbian feminist. Her refusal of the pornographic, of sex for sex's sake, would be at odds with the explosion of pro-s/m, "politically incorrect" sexual discourse that marked the sex-radical 1980s and queer 1990s, but her explicit, undeniably sexual poetry contradicts the queer dismissal of lesbian feminism as prudish or antisex.²⁷ Lorde's seemingly "essentialist" insistence in the essay that "as a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge and understanding" contradicts the essay's closing statement, her very "queer" understanding that women insisting on the power of their erotic desires challenge "a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (59).

Blood: Vitality and the Threat of Violence

It makes sense, given Lorde's conception of the erotic as anything pursued with passion and commitment, that her erotic poems are rarely limited to sexual themes. Five of the "tongue" poems also employ "blood" imagery, reminding readers that what Lorde is passionate about is not merely pleasure but life itself, which is everywhere threatened by oppression. Explaining to white feminists the daily threat of violence to "Black women and our children," Lorde wrote, "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying" ("Age," 119).

Lorde returns again and again to the story of "the white cop who shot down 10-year-old Clifford Glover" in 1973 ("The Same Death Over and Over, or Lullabies Are for Children," l. 17, *Black*, 64). The third stanza of "Power" (*Black*, 108–9), one of Lorde's best-known poems, reads:

The policeman who shot down a 10-year-old in Queens
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
and a voice said "Die you little motherfucker" and
there are tapes to prove that. At his trial
this policeman said in his own defense
"I didn't notice the size or nothing else
only the color." and
there are tapes to prove that, too. (ll. 22–28)

Lorde's committed, passionate feminism extends to concern for all black children, for, as the speaker of "The Same Death Over and Over . . ." explains to a white feminist poet, "the white cop . . . / did not fire because he saw a girl" (ll. 17–18). In "Power," where she meditates on Glover's murder and the policeman's acquittal, Lorde expresses an urgent need to turn her desperation and fury into creative power ("poetry"), rather than destructive and self-destructive violence ("rhetoric"):

. . . I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker. (ll. 16–20)
I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire (ll. 40–44)

Lorde wants to transform the violence of racist power into the empowerment provided by poetry, but fears other possible outcomes. In the second stanza, she describes a nightmare scenario in which she opts for self-preservation over collective empowerment, unable or unwilling to save children like Clifford:

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles and my stomach

churns at the imagined taste while
 my mouth splits into dry lips
 without loyalty or reason
 thirsting for the wetness of his blood (ll. 6–14)

In the fifth and final stanza Lorde imagines giving in to "the destruction within me," succumbing to the desire for revenge, however misdirected and ultimately self-defeating, sardonically parroting stereotypes of violent, black male teenagers:

and one day I will take my teenaged plug
 and connect it to the nearest socket
 raping an 85-year-old white woman
 who is somebody's mother
 and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
 a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
 "Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are." (ll.
 40–51)

"Power" is a poem awash in blood whose importance is memorialized by Lorde's careful vocalizing of the dangers of succumbing to the violent racist system that murders children, acquits policemen, and sucks people into cycles of violence that may seem like reasonable responses to oppression. Lorde's "tongue" is visible both in terms of voice (used appropriately, in the service of poetry, to avoid taking the violent route) and in stanza 2 as part of the "mouth" that is "thirsting for the wetness of his blood" (i.e., the potentially self-destructive path that is mere "rhetoric," which forecloses the future by letting down future generations).

Lorde makes clear that Glover's murder is not what officials like to call "an isolated incident" in the dedication to "A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children" (*Black*, 66–67), "for Clifford." In this three-stanza poem the first and third stanzas refer directly to Clifford Glover; in the short middle stanza Lorde makes the connection to all "wasted children": "Centuries of wasted children / warred and whored and slaughtered / anoint me guardian / for life" (ll. 20–23). Ultimately, though, she expresses an inability to stop the killing, as the poem ends, "I am bent / forever / wiping up blood / that should be / you" (ll. 36–40). As in "Power," Lorde responds to violent bloodshed with a passionate commitment to voice: "I burn / like the hungry tongue of an ochre fire / like a benediction of fury" (ll. 7–9). Remembering

that the tongue is related to Eshu/Elegba, "the rhyme god" (Grahm, *Another* 125), and that poetry for Lorde "lays the foundations for a future of change" ("Poetry" 38), the invocation of "tongue" here calls up Eshu as both "the guardian of human beings" and "the personification of Accident in a world where Destiny is inexorable" (Herskovitz, *Dahomey* 2:229, 222), that is, the Dahomean belief that the trickster/linguist god, if correctly entreated, will intervene to change one's fate. Lorde, as poet-trickster-linguist, attempts to intervene in the violence that decimates black America, pouring her ardent, activist commitment to life into the poetic process.

Edges and Crossroads

Blood and tongue, death and life, silence and speech, violence and the erotic—all meet at the crossroads, a traditional Yoruba location for shrines to Eshu and a figurative space evoked in several of Lorde's poems. Lorde herself, as postmodern lesbian feminist, as poet-theorist, as "Black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother," embodies and enacts the meetings of many paths. Eshu's shrines also stand outside every Yoruba home, a place that figures prominently in much black feminist writing. *Home Girls*, for one example, is the landmark collection of black feminist writing, published in 1983, in which Lorde's "Tar Beach" and Hull's "Poem (for Audre)" both appear.²⁸ Carole Boyce Davies's work on black women writers' use of imagery related to "home"—cultural, mythical, geographical—demonstrates the connection between a sense of home, usually imagined as a stable place, and the crossroads, or the site of motion and travel:

The politics of location brings forward a whole host of identifications and associations around concepts of place, placement, displacement. . . . It is about positionality in society based on class, gender, sexuality, age, income. It is also about relationality and the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself, or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances. (*Black Women*, 153)

As Chinosole demonstrates, home in African American women's writing is a complex image related to identity, displacement, survival, and, in Lorde's case, a complex *mélange* that exists in "the house of self" (387). Or, to return to Lorde's own formulation, "there is no place / that cannot be / home / nor is" ("School Note," ll. 22–25, *Black*, 55).

No wonder, then, that Lorde perches on edges, boundaries, and other liminal spaces. In many of her poems the speaker and/or the situation rest on the knife's edge where two or more aspects of herself meet—clashing, meshing, overlapping in turn—or where she encounters difference in another, often a lover. In "Meet" (*Black*, 33–34), the speaker recounts a sexual rendezvous between a black woman and a white woman on the cusp of the celestial seasons: "Woman when we met on the solstice / high over halfway between your world and mine / rimmed with full moon" (ll. 1–3). Their life-giving, regenerative lovemaking takes place against the backdrop of the larger world, depicted both as ancient/life giving (represented by West African references) and contemporary/violent (referenced by allusions to "the ditches of Chile and Ouagadougou," l. 38). The metaphorical and actual differences that meet in the poem take many overlapping forms: physical ("your red hair burned my fingers as I spread you / tasting your ruff down to sweetness," ll. 4–5), geological ("deep in your caverns of decomposed granite / even over my own laterite hills," ll. 12–13), visual ("you will be white fury in my navel / I will be sweeping night," ll. 33–34), relational ("now you are my child and my mother / we have always been sisters in pain," ll. 42–43), vital ("we must taste of each other's fruit / at least once / before we shall both be slain," ll. 50–52). Their lovemaking incorporates the paradoxes of the outside world as well, as their "hands touch and learn / from each others hurt" (ll. 36–37).

This meeting across differences is generative, as is made clear by the poem's mating imagery. The speaker foretells that her lover "shall get young as I lick your stomach" (l. 31), as in "get *with* young," since the speaker will invite her lover in the next stanza to "Come in the curve of the lion's bulging stomach / lie for a season out of the judging rain / we have mated we have cubbed" (ll. 44–46). "Taste my milk in the ditches of Chile and Ouagadougou" (l. 38), the speaker offers, as if she is nursing her lover back to health in a dangerous world. The lovers will return to that world, however; their meeting is momentous, but also momentary, even if there is promise of another encounter. Lorde writes in the last stanza, "we have high time for work and another meeting / women exchanging blood / in the innermost rooms of moment" (ll. 47–49), but there is no guarantee. She ends the poem, "we must taste of each other's fruit / at least once / before we shall both be slain" (ll. 50–52); their work and their love, in an unjust world, are perilous.

Foreshadowing their parting in the second stanza, where the speaker makes sensuous predictions of the passion the lovers will share, the speaker pledges, "and I promise to leave you again / full of amazement and illumi-

nations" (ll. 22–23). The couplet illustrates Lorde's utilization of edges in poetic form, not just as images. The edge first seems distinct, as line 22 includes a grammatically complete thought, even though in it the desirous lover paradoxically vows to leave. As with most lines of Lorde's poetry, this one ends without punctuation, allowing the stanza to transgress the line's (and sentence's) edge. Thus, the speaker is promising both to fulfill her lover's expectations (since now the "again" of line 22 makes clear that the lover has been amazed and illuminated before) and to leave her as must happen at the end of the encounter, made clear at the end of the poem. The form of the poetry—the fluidity of grammatical meaning across line breaks creating multivalent and sometimes paradoxical images—enacts Lorde's multi-layered dynamic sense of identity in a way less available in forms whose structure demands a more static linear logic. (Hence, perhaps, her stated preference for poetry over theory.)

For Lorde, to dwell on the edges and at the crossroads is neither to inhabit private space nor to claim individual identity. When she names herself "sister outsider" she makes clear her sense that she is not alone but one of many who are linked by their multiple differences and resistance to dominant culture.²⁹ Lorde's use of first-person plural in "A Litany for Survival," another important "edge" poem, demonstrates her sense of solidarity and community as well as illustrating her role as a leader in the community of sister outsiders (*Black*, 31–32). Lorde begins the first two stanzas of the four-stanza poem with the invocation, "For those of us." In the first stanza she describes "those of us" who inhabit society's liminal spaces; in the second stanza she elaborates that "those of us" therefore live in fear of "the heavy-footed" who "hoped to silence us" (l. 21). The controlling sound of the first stanza is the *s* that occurs twenty-three times in fourteen lines, echoing the initial *s* of "survival" in the title. The stanza ends with Lorde's hope for "us," to endure and to create "a now that can breed / futures" for our children "so their dreams will not reflect / the death of ours" (ll. 10–11, 13–14). The dominant consonant of the second stanza is the *f* of "fear." Repetition emphasizes Lorde's theme through phrases as well as sounds. In stanza 3, alternating lines end "we are afraid"; the cumulative effect is to impart the double bind of oppression. "We are afraid" whether it is day or night, whether we are satiated or hungry, loved or alone, outspoken or silent. The last, very brief stanza moves beyond portraying the oppression of sister outsiders to leading the way in a didactic prescription for change: "So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive" (ll. 42–44). Lorde echoes the end of stanza two: "For all of us / this instant and this triumph / We were never meant to sur-

vive" (ll. 22–24). In "A Litany for Survival," then, Lorde advocates a group solidarity based upon sharing the experience of differentness, not a specific difference, she emphasizes the importance of "remembering," accentuating its importance by isolating the word on its own line in the last stanza, and she admonishes her sister outsiders to follow the lead she establishes by speaking out, since they have everything to gain and nothing to lose: "We were never meant to survive."

In the Footsteps of Parker and Grahn: Creating Lesbian Community

Lorde's role as a focal point of the lesbian community, particularly for women of color, led to the making of a documentary titled, after the poem, *A Litany for Survival*. In 1990 a literal if temporary community of some one thousand participants from more than twenty countries gathered in Boston for "I Am Your Sister: Forging Global Connections Across Differences—A Conference Celebrating Audre Lorde and Her Work." Conference "work-sessions" explicitly took ideas and excerpts from Lorde's prose and poetry as starting points for discussions, performances, and consciousness-raising, with the unifying theme of meeting "Eye to Eye" (the title of one of Lorde's essays) across multiple differences.³⁰ Since the early seventies, but increasingly in the late seventies and through the eighties, Lorde's readings, like Parker's and Grahn's, created community as they gathered lesbians at bookstores, rallies, and assorted meeting places. In the words of Gloria I. Joseph, "She educates, teaches, organizes and politicizes with her extra-ordinary poetry readings" ("Personal," 23).

Several poems in *The Black Unicorn* function to create literary lesbian "community," as do Grahn's *The Common Woman*. In addition to many unnamed, on some level universal or symbolic women (e.g., "Woman," *Black*, 82; or the "Woman" of "Meet") and many first-person references to herself and/or her lover ("we," "our"), Lorde peoples the volume with a variety of individual, named women. Friends, sister poets, activists, and possibly former lovers appear in poems such as "Harriet" (*Black*, 21), "To Martha: A New Year" (*Black*, 46), "In Margaret's Garden" (*Black*, 47), and "Letter for Jan" (*Black*, 88–89). In these poems Lorde writes, if briefly, in more intimate terms of individual relationships than she does in many of the West African-inflected poems of part 1 or the poems that follow "A Litany for Survival" in their incantatory motif. "Solstice," the last poem in the book (*Black*, 117–18),

is written in the first person but clearly presents a model for readers to follow, echoing earlier poems and similarly themed essays:

May I never remember reasons
for my spirit's safety
may I never forget
the warning of my woman's flesh
weeping at the new moon
may I never lose
that terror
that keeps me brave
May I owe nothing
that I cannot repay. (ll. 33–42)

By contrast, "Letter for Jan" apparently responds to an actual letter from a poet who thought she was "chicken not to speak" (l. 1) to Lorde when she had the chance (*Black*, 88–89). The poem's reference to Lorde's blackness and Jan's fear that Lorde "was mama as laser" (l. 3), who might "reject you back into your doubt / smothering you into acceptance / with my own black song" (ll. 36–38), raise the possibility that Jan is white and that her fear is due to the racism that keeps women apart. Lorde interprets Jan's fear as related to the power of the erotic and the poetic that she channels:

When all the time
I would have loved you
speaking
being a woman full of loving
turned on
and a little bit raunchy
and heavy
with my own black song. (ll. 45–53)

"Journeystones I–XI," like *The Common Woman*, is a cycle of poems that evokes a number of individual women, creating a sense of the diversity of women the speaker has encountered in her life. Each woman is named in the first line of a brief stanza (from five to ten lines) that recalls her importance to the speaker. Lorde's diverse collection of friends, lovers, and sister outsiders provides another sense in which she is a poet of "multiple selves"; this

time, literally, there are multiple (textual) individuals who make up the conglomerate referred to as "the lesbian community."

Just what and who constitutes this community has been contended since the term came into widespread use among (some) lesbians in the early 1970s, of course. As Phelan reminds us,

The historical development of lesbian communities alerts us to the fact that there is no one such thing as "lesbian culture" for all of us to belong to; rather, there are many lesbian cultures or subcultures. "Lesbian culture" cannot be a monolith or a totality that encompasses all of our lives, and this is actually a strength. (*Getting Specific*, 68)

Some of the noisiest problems of competing needs and historical mistrust among various groups were evident at "I Am Your Sister," whose goal was to explore differences and begin to move through them to coalition and alliance. (Reports and commentary on the conference focused almost as much on complaints from participants as on the proceedings [Folayan, "I Am Your Sister"; Felman, "I Am Your Sister"].) In the tug-of-war between lesbian feminism and queer theory, Audre Lorde's work becomes, in a sense, the rope on which both teams pull. Seen from another perspective—the one I have advanced here—Lorde as rope entwines the two related camps. Lorde's identity poetics, her postmodern lesbian feminism, points up the extent to which the contest depends upon the absence of the sort of multiply positioned, category-resistant voice that the work of radical women of color represent. To claim what is queer about Lorde without acknowledging what is lesbian-feminist erases a good portion of lesbian, and queer, history.